

# Quick highs and slow death

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**This year, as many as 1,000 Americans may die of cocaine abuse — and British addicts are equally at risk, reports Thomson Prentice**

HEROIN MAY BE grabbing the headlines at the moment, but experts believe that another drug may pose as great — or an even greater — problem. The fast-growing abuse of cocaine in this country is almost certain to increase the death toll among addicts who underestimate its lethal potential.

There is concern that the rise in the number of deaths caused by cocaine in the United States will soon be mirrored here. The drug killed almost 600 people in America in 1984, compared with 169 in 1980.

Still naively seen by many Britons as a comparatively harmless "recreational" drug, the North American prognosis is that perhaps 1,000 people will play a deadly game with it this year, and lose.

British figures are harder to calculate because cocaine deaths are not registered as such. Last year, 153 drug-related deaths were recorded at inquests in England and Wales; in 1984, 696 people in the UK were convicted of cocaine offences, more than four times as many as a decade earlier.

The Home Office says that the statistics give only a hint of the real situation. And although heroin is generally viewed as the most dangerous



of drugs, cocaine is fast overtaking it. A recent World Health Organization report estimated that 4.8 million people abuse cocaine worldwide, compared with 750,000 heroin addicts.

DR DAVID COWAN, associate director of the Chelsea drug control centre at London University, says: "Unless we can educate people to the dangers of cocaine and limit the source of supply, an increase in deaths from the drug is inevitable. It is potentially a very hazardous drug, and those hazards are being underestimated. I would expect the problems we are seeing in the US to come to Britain and Europe."

Cocaine kills by striking straight at the heart. It also attacks the brain, lungs, and liver, and damages the nasal membranes of those who sniff

it. Sniffing even small amounts of the white powder causes a sharp surge in pulse rate and blood pressure. Larger doses cause the heart to beat wildly, increasing the risk of a heart attack. Most deaths are likely to be from heart failure, resulting from the impact of the drug on blood pressure. Some individuals become more prone to heart attacks after using the drug.

The risks are multiplied by the use of "crack", a variation in which cocaine is mixed with baking soda and water to create pellets which are smoked in pipes. "Crack is so dangerous that it is said even heroin addicts won't touch it", Dr Cowan says. Its lethal potential lies in its concentrated power and the huge boost that it gives to the blood pressure within seconds. Because the effect does not last as long as when the drug is sniffed, crack

is more addictive. And, because its strength is difficult to measure, overdosing is more likely.

A forerunner of crack, "free-basing" involves roughly the same process, and is almost as dangerous. Apart from all the other risks, it may seriously impair the ability of the lungs to supply the body with oxygen and rid it of carbon dioxide.

"There is an increased risk when cocaine is smoked rather than sniffed, as the action is more rapid and it is difficult to control the dosage", the WHO report says.

COCAINE-RELATED deaths are also thought to result from brain damage, in which those parts of the brain controlling respiration cease to function. A post mortem last month on Don Rogers, a 23-year-old professional American football player, revealed a toxic level of cocaine in his blood, and twice as much in his brain.

A week earlier Len Bias, a 22-year-old top-class college basketball player, had collapsed and died from cocaine-induced cardiac arrest.

"There has been a striking increase in medical emergencies and deaths associated with the use of cocaine", the *Journal of the American Medical Association* warns.

Researchers at Concordia University, Montreal, have recently emphasized that the drug "produces a more tenacious dependency than heroin". They added: "While many drug abusers recognize the inherent danger of heroin addiction, they fail to recognize the potential danger of long-term cocaine use."

That failure, in Britain as much as on the other side of the Atlantic, can be fatal.

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